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ABSTRACT

An overview is presented of a study conducted to obtain teachers' perceptions of their personal and professional development. Focused interviews were conducted with 13 female and 2 male elementary school teachers whose teaching experience ranged from 4 to 28 years. Interpretation of the data resulted in an exploration of: (1) interactions between teachers' personal and professional lives; (2) difficulties in separating personal and professional lives; and (3) tensions stemming from their jobs. Findings indicated that teachers' personal and professional lives inevitably affected each other. Most teachers reported that their personal lives affected their teaching, usually in a positive and supportive manner. However, some conditions in the professional environment produced negative effects on teachers' personal lives, leading them to try to separate their personal and professional lives as much as possible. Teachers in their early years of service were less able to separate their personal and professional lives than were more experienced teachers. Most teachers mentioned sources of tension throughout their careers. Beginning teachers reported that stress from their jobs had an adverse impact on their personal lives, mainly due to over-commitment to work. More experienced teachers indicated that tension in their professional lives was relieved by relaxing activities in their personal lives. (JD)

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Personal and Professional Conflict: Stress for Teachers

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Personal and Professional Conflict: Stress for Teachers

Teachers often find it difficult to separate their personal lives from their professional lives. Professional responsibilities such as lesson planning, paper grading, and material preparation sometimes can not be completed during school hours and therefore must be done at home. This cuts into a teacher's personal time and may create stress. Teachers also may be troubled by certain conditions at school (e.g.- students with discipline or academic problems, expectations of principal or community, rules and procedures) and may continue to think about these conditions even after leaving school at the end of the day.

Specifically, how do teachers' personal and professional lives interact, what are the effects of this interaction, and how do teachers deal with stress which might be created because of this interaction? Burden (1979, 1980) conducted a study to obtain teachers' perceptions of their personal and professional development; information was provided by the teachers to answer these questions. The study also provided evidence for stages of teacher career development in terms of changes in job skills, knowledge, and behaviors; changes in attitudes and outlooks; and changes in job events.

This paper will describe: (1) the original study, (2) the interaction of the teachers' personal and professional lives, (3) the difficulty in separating the personal and professional lives, and (4) the tension from the job.

The Research Study

The purpose of Burden's study was to determine teachers' perceptions of their personal and professional development for their entire careers by conducting focused interviews with experienced teachers. The study objectives focused on personal and professional changes and influences.

The focused interview allowed the teachers to reflect on any variables they thought were important to their careers. They could relate key variables that affected their personal and professional development and discuss how those variables might have changed over the years. Giorgi (1967) said the essential phenomenon as it was lived and experienced by the subjects should be captured in an interview; otherwise the research would lose much of its value. The focused interview allowed for this phenomenon.

Method

Subjects. The sample consisted of 15 public school teachers from eight suburban school districts in central Ohio. The thirteen women and two men were teaching at the elementary level (K-6). The teachers ranged in school teaching experience from 4 to 28 years.

Because of the relatively small sample size, a number of criteria were established for this exploratory study to narrow the range of variability for the teachers interviewed. The sample included only regular classroom teachers who had their entire teaching experience at the elementary level, those with limited delays from the end of high school and the start of teaching, and those with few breaks in service once starting to teach.

Interview Guide. The focused interview's distinguishing characteristics made it particularly useful in uncovering a diversity of responses which were salient to the teachers as they described their careers.

An interview guide was developed which followed the focused interview guidelines proposed by Merton, Fiske, and Kendall (1956).

There is inherent flexibility in the interviewer's conduct due to the necessity of responding to new emerging data. After the teacher completed the description of the first year, the investigator provided a transition so the teacher would discuss the second year in a similar manner. Each successive year and each school setting was discussed.

Six experimental interviews were conducted to: (1) test the design of the interview, (2) improve the interview skills of the interviewer, and (3) develop consistency in the interviewer's approach.

Procedures for Data Collection. The teachers who agreed to the interview were sent a letter which outlined the objectives of the study, reminded them of the tape recorded interview, and assured them of anonymity. With the letter was a school data sheet which the teacher was asked to complete prior to the interview. The data sheet was used as an aid to the investigator during the interview but also as a means of stimulating the teachers' memories of specific details or general patterns of their careers. Also included with the letter were ten sample questions to give the teachers some idea of the topics that might be addressed in the interview.

Data Analysis. The audio tapes of the interviews were transcribed onto note cards and were later typed consecutively on typing paper. Definitional guidelines were developed which served as a basis of decision when coding the ideas provided by the teachers. The constant comparative method of qualitative analysis proposed by Glaser (1965) and Glaser and Strauss (1967, 1970) was used to analyze the data. This method involved the comparison of the ideas which were coded into each study objective and the determination of

topical categories.

Interaction of Personal and Professional Lives

Most teachers indicated that their personal lives had affected their teaching and, in turn, their teaching had affected their personal lives. Table 1 provides a summary of these influences.

Personal Life Affects Professional Life

Most teachers reported that their personal lives affected their teaching, usually in a positive and supportive manner. Among the personal aspects cited were their attitudes and feelings about themselves, their spouses and families, their outside school activities, and their personal qualities.

Several teachers said their positive feelings about themselves allowed them to be more positive when dealing with the children in school. When they were more comfortable and happier with themselves, they were more comfortable and happier when working with the children.

> "If you're happy in your personal life, you're happy with the children. If you're not happy in your personal life, you waste a lot of time worrying about that and then you can't do your job as a teacher. If things are going well at home, you can concentrate on being yourself, being genuine and interesting as a teacher."

> "I just learned to like me better, which I think helps in teaching, too. Because I think when you're real satisfied with yourself, then you can be happier in your job."

Some teachers indicated that their relationship with their spouses resulted in more warmth, understanding, and compassion when dealing with the children at school. The teachers' understanding of their own children also helped them in their classrooms.

> "I think my marriage had a big influence on how I teach and approach the children. I think it makes me more understanding. If I feel that I'm loved and wanted and needed, it's easier for me to make that child at school feel that he's loved and wanted and needed."

Because of their personal activities outside of school, a few teachers said they were more flexible, compassionate, and understanding of the children at school.

> "Something that has influenced me some in my thinking is my taking classes in painting. The struggling that I went through in the process of trying to do that has given me a little insight into what the kids go through."

Professional Life Affects Personal Life

Most teachers reported that their professional activities affected their personal lives. Professional activities positively affected the general quality of life, personal development, and home life. Teachers also said there were negative aspects such as strain on their families and on their own mental health.

Some teachers said their jobs enhanced their lives and made them feel more fulfilled. They also indicated that their personal development was influenced positively by the people they worked with in the schools.

> "I found our staff made a big difference in me. From them I learned to question and to develop answers for myself. I learned to set standards for myself even higher than the ones I had set before. I think enjoying teaching and the confidence in that helped boost the confidence outside the school."

> "Because of my teaching experience, I feel I'm capable of doing some of these other things outside of school. This is where my job has enhanced my living and the activities I do."

The professional lives of some teachers positively affected their lives at home. When they were comfortable and happy with their teaching, they often were comfortable and happy at home as well. Knowledge of children and

teaching also helped teachers in raising their own children.

> "If you're not happy in your job, you feel like a failure. And then you don't want to throw off all those problems on your family. If you feel satisfaction in your teaching, you're going to come home and feel satisfaction here. My experience in teaching helped me more with my own children. I made sure that the bad things I saw in school, in teachers, and in kids would not come up in our family."

The professional lives of some teachers created strain and tension which affected family relationships. Tension will be discussed in a later section.

> "Because of the changes in education today and the amount of energy a teacher has to put out to cope with the discipline, I think my family has suffered for it, too. It takes patience to work out a class situation and it's a fact that by the time I get home, there isn't any more patience left."

> "I don't think your job should take all of your time but it can be that demanding to be a 24-hour job. And when you start in September and go until June, you have those children with you all year long in your thoughts. You take the work home with you. You take the mental strain home with you."

Difficulty Separating Personal and Professional Lives

Some teachers viewed their personal and professional lives as being inseparable. Some accepted that merging as a natural condition of teaching while others saw it as a desirable condition. The teachers reported thinking about their teaching and the children often when they were not in school and also reported spending much of their personal time obtaining materials or thinking of new teaching methods to enrich the class. Often many of their personal friends were teachers in the same building so it was difficult to separate their personal and professional lives.

> "I don't like to disassociate my personal life from teaching because, to me, teaching is a very personal thing. And it's because a lot of my close friends are at school with me. So it's like my personal and working lives are very close. I don't look at it as an 8 to 5 job and I don't quit when I come home; you can't do that when you teach. You carry everything with you 24 hours a day."

> "I'm glad we talked about the school and about personal life because they seem to go hand-in-hand. It's not a job where you can just go home. I can not just leave it. Even when you're sitting here at night, there are still thoughts of school zooming through your head."

Some teachers made a deliberate effort to separate their personal and professional lives. They either preferred to keep their personal and professional lives independent of each other, or they tried to keep them separate to prevent the tension and demands of teaching from affecting their personal lives. Despite their efforts, the merging of the personal and professional lives often occurred.

> "Teaching is my job. I'll do the best I can while I'm there and when I'm home, I want to do other things. I didn't ever feel that way until a couple of years ago. And now after 15 years of teaching, I feel like I come first; my thoughts and feelings come first."

> "There is an overlap of my personal life and teaching because a lot of friends I made at teaching that work with me are people who I do things with in my private life. But I try to separate that. I am a teacher and that's the way it is. And I talk about teaching even though I do try to separate it; it still gets in there."

Tension from the Job

When discussing the demands of the job, the teachers commented on (1) the personal time required to do teaching tasks, (2) the sources of tension, and (3) ways they released the tension.

Personal Time Commitment

Most teachers accepted the volume of work and the pressures during their first year as part of the job; they were willing to take work home and use personal time to complete it. Less was said about taking work home and committing their personal time during the later years in their careers.

> "I think most things that came along that first year, I assumed were part of the territory."

Many teachers said they spent a great deal of time at home during their first year to read the curriculum and textbooks, grade homework papers, write lesson plans, and find workable activities. Few mentioned taking home school work during the later years in their careers.

> "I just remember mainly that it was just a tremendous amount of work because you don't have the background and you have to start everything new. I would work at school until 4 p.m. and go home and work all night every night."

> "There was lots and lots of homework for me in my first year; a lot of preparation. Not until quite a bit later in the year do I recall not bringing a lot home each night."

Some teachers had to adjust the time they allotted to their own interests and activities around the time needed to complete school work. This was reported mainly for the first year. Less was said about making these adjustments for the later years.

> "I just had to learn to organize my home time and my time with friends around the time I needed for school work."

> "I think that I spent so much energy worrying about the school situation that first year that I didn't have time for hobbies and interests."

Sources of Tension

Most teachers mentioned sources of tension throughout their careers. The teachers reported experiencing stress as beginning teachers because of time demands to complete many tasks (as mentioned in an earlier section). Most tension for more experienced teachers originated in their professional lives and included: the energy required to run their classrooms, uncertainty over school closings, state and federal guidelines, required forms, fast pace of life, accountability, competitiveness among teachers, and conflicts with parents.

"I would like to know how to deal with the tension of teaching. I think the whole way of living is more tense now than what it was 12 years ago when I started teaching. The pace is too fast for dealing with people as human beings."

"The accountability business is getting stronger and stronger and I think that's what is bringing a lot of this competition feeling and pressure feeling. Teaching is a real competitive thing now. It's not as relaxing as it used to be because everyone is worried about what everyone else is going to do or say."

Release of Tension

The teachers reported that they accepted many tensions in the first year as simply being part of the job. Later in their careers the teachers were less willing or able to absorb the tension as part of the job. They sought ways to release their tension or to move away from the source of it. Most sources of the tension were in their professional lives while most tension-relieving activities were in their personal lives.

Only a few teachers indicated they they adjusted to the tension through their activities at school. One teacher became less personal with the children after she discovered that she had a difficult time dealing with student problems. Another teacher used his activities as a swimming coach as a release of tension from his teaching and also as a source of fulfillment. Another teacher tried to talk about non-school topics at lunch.

"I used to be softer but I had to get harder outwardly because I couldn't cope with the problems they had. I used to come home and cry at night and now I don't. You have to learn self-survival."

"We try to avoid talking about the kids so much at lunch because we try to just take a break for our own mental health."

Several teachers said they needed the summer to be away from the children so that they would be rested and mentally ready for the children in the Fall. The teachers who worked during the summers often took

construction, secretarial, or accounting jobs that had no contact with children. Many teacher chose not to work in the summer so they could rest and pursue their own interests.

> "This goes clear back to my first and second summers when I worked in playgrounds and the migrant school. I just didn't think I was prepared mentally to go back to the classroom after having worked with the kids all summer. So consequently from that point on, I've always done a summer job that was not related to working with kids. And I felt myself much more ready to go back and do the job."

> "The disadvantage of teaching is that it takes so much time and so much energy. During the nine months, you have homework to do and activities to plan and it really limits you as far as other things. You've given so much that you can't do anything else during that time. Of course the summers are nice but you feel like you have to rest up.

Half the teachers said they tried to release their tension or tried to move away from the source of it after school, in the evenings, and on the weekends. Their activities such as meeting friends or working on hobbies often allowed them to forget the school situation and take a break from working with children. One teacher said he released tension after school by yelling at other cars while he was driving home.

> "You just have to be able to go out that door and leave a lot of it there. And when you get home, you have to kind of rejuvenate. And one thing I have done is to cuss people out on my way driving home."

> "The first year I had few outside interests. The second year I started looking for other things so that I wouldn't get too discouraged and also to get away from teaching. In teaching, you have to get away from it or you can get bogged down. I bought a hourse after my first year. You work inside with the kids all day and you get kind of tense at times. I can get out and work with the horses and I can forget about it for a while. It's really a way of relaxing and forgetting about the problems of the day so I'll be ready to tackle the next day."

Conclusion

Teachers' personal and professional lives inevitably affect each other. Teachers appreciate the positive effects their personal lives have on their professional lives and the positive effects their professional lives have on their personal lives. Sometimes conditions in the professional environment produce negative effects on teachers' personal lives and, because of that, teachers often try to separate their personal and professional lives as much as possible.

Teachers in their early years of service were less able to separate their personal and professional lives than more experienced teachers. Teachers in their later years of service were less willing to let their professional lives interfere with their personal lives and were more able to separate their personal and professional lives.

TABLE 1

INTERACTION OF PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL LIVES

	Personal Life Affects Professional Life	Professional Life Affects Personal Life
Positive Effects	Their positive attitudes and feelings allowed them to be more positive when dealing with children in school. When they were more comfortable and happier with themselves, they were more comfortable and happier with the children. Good relationships with spouse resulted in warmth, understanding, and compassion when dealing with children at school. Teachers' understanding of their own children helped them at school. Because of personal activities outside of school, teachers said they were more flexible, compassionate, and understanding of children at school.	Professional lives positively affected teachers' quality of life, personal development, and home life. Teaching enhanced their lives and made them feel more fulfilled. People they worked with positively influenced their personal development. If comfortable and happy in teaching, then they often were comfortable and happy at home. Knowledge of children and teaching helped raise their own children.
Negative Effects		Created a strain on their families and on their own mental health. Personal time was needed to complete school work (especially in the first year).

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